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TAGS: KIRF KISL PGOV PHUM UZ  
SUBJECT: THE REJUVENATION OF ISLAM: WHY UZBEK MOSQUES ARE  
OVERFLOWING

REF: TASHKENT 576

Classified By: AMB. JON R. PURNELL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D).

¶1. (U) This is the first in a series on the state of Islam in Uzbekistan with future cables addressing a trip to Friday prayer, the relationship of mosque and state, and the growing market for Islamic materials and media.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY: Uzbek men are filling the mosques in search of solace, enlightenment and community. According to anecdotal evidence, mosque attendance has increased dramatically in many parts of the country over the last two years, as has interest in religion among young people. Increased mosque attendance provides the government with a better opportunity to track the emerging faithful, as well as use state authorized Imams to deliver the message it wants the populous to hear. With the deterioration of socio-economic conditions and lack of opportunities to gather publicly, mosques serve as community rallying points. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (C) Over the past ten years, Islam has experienced a rebirth in Uzbekistan, albeit a state-monitored one. As would be natural after the break up of the Soviet Union, interest in religion increased. In the last two years, mosque attendance has shot up, a phenomena which has been attributed to the continuing deterioration of the economy, a decrease in police harassment of practicing Muslims, and the increase in young adults seeking moral support and religious instruction. Driving by nearly any mosque in Tashkent on a Friday afternoon, one can not help but notice the crowds. This marked increase, especially among the young, has occurred at a time when the government has cracked down on any "non-state sanctioned" worship. This youth surge is also credited to estimates that approximately sixty percent of the population is under the age of thirty, many of whom have recently reached the traditional maturity level to attend Friday prayer.

¶4. (C) In a conversation with various day laborers and mechanics in Tashkent, Poloff was told that more and more young men are seeking support from the community of worshipers at the mosque. "When you have nothing to do and your pockets are empty, at least you still have your faith," claimed one individual who works sporadically in construction. Contacts also reported that some worshipers were not necessarily attending for divine enlightenment, but used Friday prayers as a means to network, either to find jobs or simply confide in others with similar, desperate situations. Many others fall on the opposite end of the spectrum, proving their devotion to the Islamic faith by praying five times a day and abstaining from alcohol.

¶5. (C) Renewed interest in religion is not limited to the

capital. In fact, an Embassy human rights contact reported that in a survey he conducted in Bukhara after the May 2005 events in Andijon, he found a significant increase in those attending Friday prayers. Many mosques reported a doubling or tripling of attendance in the past year (ref A). While the activist did not ask for reasons behind this increase, he speculated that lack of jobs and the constant struggle to survive is taking its toll on the population. He said many may see Islamic teachings as key to maintaining or restoring hope.

¶ 6. (C) The head Imam from the Kashkadaryo Province confirmed to Poloff that his congregation has grown significantly as well. As construction nears completion on a project to expand the capacity of his mosque from 900 worshipers to 10,000, he stated that currently the congregation spills out into the courtyard during Friday prayer. He also noted similarly overcrowded mosques in Tashkent. He claimed that smaller towns and villages, however, had significantly smaller congregations due to logistical constraints and time conflicts with their work in the fields. When asked if the region was lacking mosques, he replied that there were fewer than ninety in the entire country before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now there are nearly two hundred in his province alone, and over 2000 country-wide, and "yet they continue to build more." He attributed the rejuvenation of the Islamic faith to an increase in religious freedoms and Islamic media outlets, such as television, radio and print materials available to the public.

¶ 7. (C) The one area outside of this overall trend seems to be the rural Ferghana Valley, a section of the country historically known to be more religious. In direct contrast

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to other reports, residents from the farming districts in the Valley are witnessing a decrease in mosque attendance. They attribute this not to the communities, disinterest in religion, but to the decreasing population of men in many of these towns and villages. They noted that working age men were migrating to Russia or other neighboring countries in search of employment, a statement that corroborates Post's previous reports on labor migration (reftel).

¶ 8. (C) COMMENT: In a bizarre twist, it seems that the rebirth of Islam in Uzbekistan can indirectly be attributed to the GOU's increased control over Muslim leaders and religious figures. In fact, some observant Muslims have told emboffs that they feel less fearful about attending Friday services now than in the past, because government approval for mosques and sermons means the state at least tacitly supports the institutions. If reports are true that the Imam's sermons are kept in check by the GOU and participants of Friday prayer are closely watched, then the Karimov regime may allow the blossoming of congregations at area mosques as a way to meet the spiritual needs of the population, while at the same time keeping tabs on the religious. It is possible that the government has realized that allowing Muslim communities to flourish under the watchful eye of the government reduces the need for underground religious groups or mosques, typically a breeding ground of fundamentalism. However, the government would be wise to not discount the underlying economic reasons for the increasing interest in Islam, especially among youth.

PURNELL